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Feeble-mindedness, Criminal Behavior, and Women

*A Turn-of-the-Century
Case Study*

by Tommy R. Thompson



TO BE FEMALE and confined in a prison or mental institution in the late 1800s and early 1900s was a depressing, shocking, and horrifying experience. Incarceration produced few, if any, positive benefits for a woman. Those confined were individuals with whom most of society preferred not to be associated; better to remove them from sight and contact with others by placing them in an institution, society said, even if there was little chance they would be reformed, trained for a new life, or "cured."

It was into this frightening world that a young woman born of immigrant parents in Council Bluffs, Iowa, stepped in the late 1890s. Bettie Libbecke, better known as "Fainting Bertha," would spend half of her life in prisons and mental institutions. In the end those facilities would devour her as they did many other women.

What we know about Bettie's adult life is constructed from institutional records and newspaper stories. These sources provide a biased filter through which any researcher or reader today must view Bettie Libbecke. Thus certain questions that might occur to us cannot be answered — questions that apparently also plagued authorities a century ago. What this saga does reveal, however, is how certain social institutions — the prison and mental health systems and the press — reacted to and coped with a woman who lived on the fringes of that society.

LITTLE IS KNOWN about Bettie's childhood years. Her parents, William and Mary Libbecke, came to the United States in 1869 from Germany and, perhaps, Switzerland. By the mid-seventies they were living in Council Bluffs along the Missouri River. William appeared in the Council Bluffs city directory for the first time in 1876 as a "Custom Boot and Shoemaker." Nine children were born to the Libbeckes by the late eighties; Bettie, born in 1880, was near the middle. William earned a satisfactory income in his business, located on Broadway, the major east-west arterial in the small city. The

children attended Hill Elementary School.

In 1895 tragedy struck the family when Bettie's father died of pneumonia. He left his wife with six children still living at home, although William and Elizabeth ("Lizzie") were in their early twenties. Both were employed, William as a bartender and Lizzie as an ironer at a laundry. Bettie, the next eldest at fifteen, now left school and found work as a domestic with a Council Bluffs family.

In 1896, a year after her father died, Bettie developed what was diagnosed as encephalitis, a condition that produced delirium and was characterized by "inflammatory and degenerative lesions of the brain and [spinal] cord." Then, in the fall of 1897, while riding home one Sunday evening on the streetcar, she was "seized with hysterical spasms and caused quite a commotion . . . before she was quieted."

Soon after, she entered the Iowa Institute for the Feeble-minded at Glenwood, Iowa, and apparently stayed there until mid-1898. Hospital authorities concluded she was "feeble-minded" and thus "could not be held morally or legally responsible for her conduct" — a conclusion that would reverberate throughout Bertha's life.

Doctors widely believed that at least some cases of "feeble-mindedness" were brought on by illness. "Brain fever," or spinal meningitis, for example, was regarded as one of the most common causes, and Bettie's earlier encephalitis bore similarities to this ailment. Followed by a decrease in mental powers, feeble-mindedness, by the prevalent definition, prohibited the individual from distinguishing between right and wrong. As a result, it was reasoned, such individuals could easily fall into a life of crime, alcoholism, and, in the case of females, prostitution.

Not everyone agreed with the idea that individuals, especially females, were likely to become criminals because they were feeble-minded. Katharine B. Davis, head of the New York Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills, tested hundreds of the inmates and concluded that the condition produced some but not all criminals. The more standard view of society, however, was that female criminals were typically feeble-minded, and that feeble-minded

Left: Bettie "Fainting Bertha" Libbecke, 1904.



The Iowa Institute for the Feeble-minded, in Glenwood, diagnosed Libbecke as "feeble-minded" and hence incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong. The label often assumed such women would turn to crime.

individuals were prime candidates to become criminals. Bettie Libbecke would soon fulfill this image — either by her own choice or by her limited ability to make appropriate moral decisions.

IN THE SUMMER of 1898, after her release from the Glenwood hospital, Bettie visited the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha, across the river from her hometown of Council Bluffs. While thousands of tourists viewed the state and international exhibits in ivory Renaissance-style buildings, a pretty, well-dressed, and articulate Bettie Libbecke searched out gentlemen with diamond stickpins or studs.

Bettie was learning the art of the pickpocket. According to a later newspaper account, she apparently had met one Lou Gunther of Chicago at the exposition and had fallen in love with him. Then, she said, he led her into a life "calculated to destroy all respect for honor and morality." Gunther taught her to fall against men, pretending to faint, in order to steal any valuable possessions. According to one report,

Bettie took diamond studs from three men at the exposition, but they chose not to prosecute. After the exposition, Gunther took Bettie to St. Paul, Minnesota, where she ran afoul of the law again by committing a \$45 robbery. Abandoned by Gunther, she returned to Council Bluffs.

Tracing her through newspaper accounts and institutional records, we find her soon thereafter incarcerated in the Clarinda State Hospital in Clarinda, Iowa, as a nymphomaniac — and hence victim of another label besides feeble-minded. In following years Omaha police always listed her in arrest records as a prostitute, although there is no indication that she was ever arrested for prostitution.

Years later she said she had been induced into a sexual encounter by an "aged man" after her release from the Glenwood hospital in 1898. Such an incident may have turned Bettie toward prostitution as well as pickpocketing in her effort to support herself. According to Joanne Meyerowitz in her recent book, *Women Adrift*, young working-class females who supported themselves sometimes turned to prostitution full or part time to supplement their wages and thus alleviate the poverty that surrounded them. With apparently no legitimate

job skills, Bettie may have reacted to her poverty in a similar manner.

IN THE SUMMER of 1899 Bettie was arrested once again for "Larceny from the person," this time in Council Bluffs. A pattern of behavior was now emerging. Every time she was released from an institution, Bettie returned to her trade as pickpocket. If she was in fact "mentally deficient," as defined by the Iowa Institute for the Feeble-minded in 1897, she was also skillful enough to engage in her chosen field of crime — and gained notoriety for it. By the next year the nickname "Fainting Bertha" would begin to appear in print, identifying her pickpocketing style. The fifteen-year-old Bettie Libbecke in the 1895 state census would be replaced by the twenty-year-old Bertha Libbecke in the 1900 federal census. More important, the name "Fainting Bertha" would often appear in headlines as reporters followed her exploits.

In 1900 Bertha's career swung into full speed. She and her mother and the three sisters who lived with them were undoubtedly struggling financially. Bertha's mother and thirteen-year-old Minnie were not employed. Lizzie worked as a dressmaker, although she would soon return to her previous occupation as a laundress. Nothing is known about the other sister, Anna. One other sister, Emma, who did not share the same residence, would be arrested a year later as a "suspicious character" and "prostitute." Bertha's "earnings" may well have helped her family survive.

In February Bertha was arrested for taking items from an Omaha store, although charges were dismissed. A few months later she was arrested under an alias for shipping a rented bicycle from Hastings, Nebraska, to sister Lizzie in Omaha. She pleaded guilty and was fined \$50. Within a month Bertha was arrested in Omaha again, this time for picking the pockets of streetcar conductors. Supposedly, within a week she had "touched" half a dozen conductors and possibly some passengers by pretending to be thrown against them when the streetcar came to a halt. She had covered her actions by drawing back quickly from her target, blushing, and excusing herself.

During these episodes local newspapers

called Bertha a "notorious thief" and declared her well known to Omaha police. In fact, throughout her career the newspapers often gave Bertha front-page coverage. Because of her pickpocket antics and later bizarre behavior, along with reporters' own colorful writing, Bertha's stories probably helped draw readers.

A journalistic subjectivity is evident in various physical descriptions of Bertha that appeared in stories in the early 1900s. One Omaha newspaper described her as short and plump; two others labeled her petite and "stylishly dressed." Some reporters nicknamed her "Chemical Ann," referring to bleached hair; others called it "golden hair." One newspaper noted her "wicked little lips."

Scholar Kathy Peiss, in *Cheap Amusements*, considers such issues of physical attributes and adornment. She writes that many working-class women wore low necklines, "rats" and "puffs" in their hair, and gauze stockings to attract males who would then pay their way into dance halls and amusement parks. Bertha may also have capitalized on her attractiveness when pickpocketing. When Bertha "fainted" or fell against a victim, the individual reportedly tried to "help" the attractive young lady recover by holding her. This was especially true if the victim was a man.

WHEN BERTHA appeared in the Omaha police court in late May 1900, authorities and reporters were perplexed as to whether she was truly insane, and therefore not responsible for her actions, or simply a somewhat

**"FAINTING BERTHA"
BOUND TO BE MERRY**
**Has a Smile on Her Face When
Bound Over for Trial.**
"Fainting Bertha" Miller believes in
making the best of a bad situation.
"Do you know..."

successful con artist. Bertha may well have been mentally deficient but intelligent enough to be a fairly good crook. She seemed to exist between two worlds. Consequently, no one knew quite how to deal with her, and a constant skepticism appears in the detailed newspaper accounts. The *Omaha World-Herald* described her as an "artistic weeping beauty" and said she could make the tears roll down her cheeks from her "mild blue eyes." And the *Omaha Daily News* concluded Bertha was one of the "cleverest female crooks that ever nipped a diamond or touched a pocket."

Bertha seemed to agree. When arrested for the robbery of a streetcar conductor, she exclaimed in her defense: "I had been good for so long [a month since the last charge] that I just couldn't keep from doing it. . . I just wanted to see if I had lost any of my skill." Nevertheless, in court she pleaded insanity. The court accepted the plea but also ruled she was not sufficiently ill to enter an institution; her degree of feeble-mindedness was not so serious that she endangered society. She was free and back on the streets.

Bertha must have been destitute when released from jail because a few days later she was arrested for attempting to steal a basket of food from a local grocery dealer, not her typical crime. Bertha's mother immediately filed a complaint contending Bertha was insane. (A few years later Bertha stated that her mother often used this method to keep her out of prison.) Omaha authorities decided the best solution — for them — was to ship Bertha across the Missouri River to Council Bluffs and let the hometown officials rule on her sanity. Bertha did spend the next few months in St. Bernard's Hospital, a mental institution in Council Bluffs. However, she was released "as not being a proper charge for the state at that institution" because of her early diagnosis of feeble-mindedness.

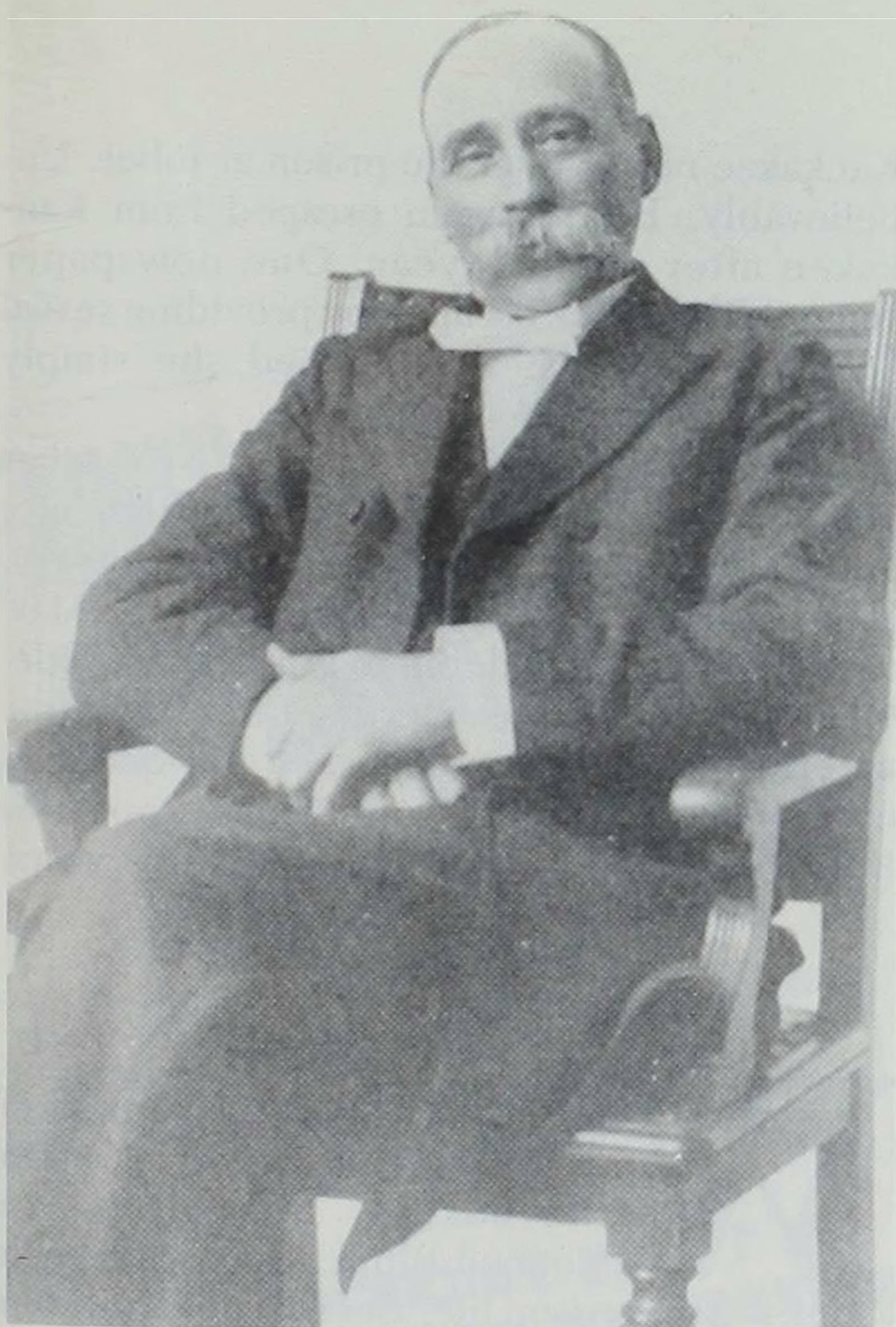
Bertha seems to have been smart enough to understand she had been labeled feeble-minded and could not be held accountable for her crimes. Wedged between a system of punishment that would not control her and a medical world that could not cure her, she apparently used the system, and eventually would be abused by the system.

BY LATE SEPTEMBER 1900, Bertha had headed to Des Moines. After registering at a hotel as B. Carlisle, she went to B.L. Chittenden's jewelry store. Dressed so stylishly she appeared to be "the daughter of some wealthy capitalist," she examined several diamond rings and in the process substituted a paste ring for a real diamond worth \$100. Arrested on the street soon after, she identified herself as Ida Scott and became hysterical, pleading for her release and pointing out that she had been in mental institutions. A few days later, on the advice of the head of the State Board of Control (which supervised the state's mental hospitals), Des Moines officials released her again because she could not be held responsible for her deeds and behavior.

From Des Moines Bertha continued her wanderings. In Joplin, Missouri, she was arrested in late September for the diamond substitution game and was sent to a mental hospital at Macon, Missouri. According to her sister Lizzie, several guards at the Macon institution assaulted Bertha. The men were held for trial, but when the case was ready for court in the spring of 1901, Bertha suddenly "escaped" from the hospital and thus could not testify against the guards.

In 1902 and early 1903 Bertha moved from city to city plying her trade. Sioux City police caught her in another diamond switch, and she confessed after a session in the "sweat Box." Charges were dropped, however, and authorities simply put her on a train to Omaha. Before Bertha left she sat in a rocking chair at the police station and sang soft lullabies, with an occasional "wild outburst of music." This type of behavior, typical whenever she was placed in custody, may have been her tactic to convince everyone of her "feeble-mindedness," or may have indicated an actual mental imbalance. (This behavior, one would guess, is also the sort of colorful material that reporters would be eager to include in their front-page stories and headlines.)

Within a few weeks she was caught stealing a diamond pin from a fellow train passenger en route to Chicago. Convicted and sentenced in early 1903 to the Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet, she was later moved to the Hospital for



With confidence, the Reverend Charles W. Savidge of Omaha offered to reform Bertha and rid her of "devils."

the Insane at Kankakee, Illinois, from which she escaped.

By February 1904 Bertha was in a deplorable condition. Faint and wearing only a thin dress in the bitter weather, she was found lying on the Omaha streetcar tracks (a car had stopped just as it reached her). She was arrested as a suspicious character and for drunkenness. Other arrests for drunkenness soon followed — although Bertha may not have been actually intoxicated when apprehended. City officials had decided to arrest her every time she appeared in public unless accompanied by a member of her family, hoping the escort would keep Bertha out of trouble. Thus, yet another label had been applied to Bertha, possibly without any validity, in society's ambivalent effort to control her.

In police court she asked the judge whether she should join a church and remarked that it would be easy to do because "I got my Easter hat already." A reporter noted that her lavish lavender hat looked as if two or three pigeons had landed on it and "exploded." Since Bertha

typically told court officials she would behave if released, her suggestion regarding church membership may have been a similar ruse.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, a guardian angel appeared. Arrested for stealing \$40 from an Omaha candy store, Bertha again faced prison. Then the Reverend Charles W. Savidge, an Omaha minister for over twenty years, stepped in and offered to try and reform Bertha.

Like Bertha, Savidge himself was somewhat of an enigma. He was a fundamentalist who believed God spoke with him through visions. After serving as a Methodist minister for several years, he had left that church, contending that it ignored the poor and unwanted members of society. He had formed "The People's Church," and through it tried to reach the poor and some of Omaha's unwelcome residents such as prostitutes. Savidge also founded a home for the aged and destitute (an institution that exists today).

Savidge's projects all demanded funds, and he sought many avenues of support. He relied heavily on fees from performing marriages and united so many couples he became known as the "marrying parson." Analogous to some of today's evangelists, Savidge was known to call upon "sinners" to send money to him to finance various projects. Quite possibly, he saw Bertha as a money-making proposition as well as a soul he could lead to a moral life.

Savidge told the court that Bertha was "full of devils." "Nobody has ever made an honest effort to cast them out of her," he said. "Insane asylums and prisons have failed to reform this girl, and it is plain that nothing can lift her up but faith in God." The court accepted his offer. Savidge had seemingly assumed a tremendous task with little chance of success, as events soon showed.

In early August Bertha stole a watch from a pawnshop. Savidge shielded her from prosecution by persuading her to return it. She was not as lucky when she picked the pocket of another merchant who decided to press charges. Locked in her cell (she always asked for the same one), Bertha screamed, threw herself on the floor sobbing, pounded on the bars with

her shoe, and cried out "wild prayers."

In calmer moments she expressed her apparent repentance to a reporter: "After all my friends and Reverend Savidge have done for me to think that I should have done that. I did try hard not to make that touch, but I had to do it. There was such a good chance." Asking the reporter for a light for her cigarette, she declared, "After being religious so long, it does feel mighty good to smoke again. It's a terrific strain on a person to be religious."

Omaha authorities decided to follow standard procedure and sent Bertha to Council Bluffs and St. Bernard's Hospital. After a short stay she claimed she simply walked out the door to freedom. Resuming her wandering, she was arrested in St. Louis for pickpocketing, probably drawn there by the 1904 World's Fair. Released on bond, she fled to Chicago where she took a valuable coat from Marshall Field's and Company. Bertha moved on to Milwaukee, and more petty thefts. Still eluding authorities, Bertha registered at an Oshkosh, Wisconsin, hotel as Maude Harold of Chicago and then stole \$65 from a local proprietor while she was "jollyng him up." At the train station she attempted to steal from the register. Caught by the station agent, she fled on the train.

Back in Milwaukee she was arrested for attempting to rob a streetcar passenger. At the jail she apparently engaged in her typical bizarre behavior. She remarked that she enjoyed seeing her picture in the mug book because it made her feel as if someone in Milwaukee was thinking of her. She gave "frantic yells for someone to love her and . . . long-drawn wails of remorse expressed for her career of crime." She tore her clothing, smashed the furniture in her cell, and apparently attempted suicide by turning on the gas heater. In the opinion of one reporter, Bertha was pretending insanity in order that the court might send her to a mental institution rather than a prison.

Probably much to her surprise, though, the Milwaukee court decided to send Bertha to Chicago to be tried for the theft from Marshall Field's. Chicago authorities, however, dispensed with a trial and concluded Bertha was insane and that she belonged in the asylum at

Kankakee rather than the prison at Joliet. Unbelievably, Bertha again escaped from Kankakee after about a year. One newspaper suggested that she escaped by providing sexual favors for guards; she claimed she simply walked out the door.

Bertha returned to Omaha in November 1905. There, local officials arrested her at a sister's home and returned her to Chicago. There she was tried and convicted for the Marshall Field's theft and sent to Joliet for an "indeterminate" sentence. Bertha Libbecke, "the notorious shoplifter pickpocket and queen of confidence women," would not escape this time. She stayed in Joliet the next five years.

WHEN BERTHA was paroled in early 1911, she was released to the custody of relatives in Council Bluffs. Even with such a long taste of prison life, Bertha could not stop her old ways. Almost immediately she was arrested in Kansas City for stealing a watch. When caught, Bertha threatened to jump from her hotel window. She pleaded with authorities, "Electrocute or hang me, but don't send me to jail again."

Undoubtedly, her stay at Joliet had made its impression. Physical and sexual abuse of women in America's prisons had long been a problem, and Bertha had probably been subjected to her share of these types of mistreatment. Furthermore, if conditions at Joliet were anything like those at the Missouri state prison in Jefferson City fifteen years later, she could have found worms in the oatmeal, maggots in the hash, cockroaches on the dining table, and rats in the cells.

Bertha did not go to prison this time; authorities decided she would be sent to an asylum. She reacted with "great disorder," throwing her dishes through a window. Asylum conditions in general were miserable too, a situation Bertha no doubt understood after numerous incarcerations and an alleged rape in 1900 at the Macon, Missouri, mental hospital. Asylum patients often sat idle because of insufficient staff. Violent patients, such as Bertha,

Fainting Bertha Confesses to Big Series of Thefts

Stores Victimized Didn't Know
She Had Been Stealing
From Them.

ALL YESTERDAY SPENT IN PRAYER AND CONFESSION

Pastor Savidge Says Just One
Big, Gray Devil Left
in Her.

With hair wildly disheveled, face
wet with perspiration and body
wrenched with paroxysms of pain,
Fainting Bertha Liebke was on her
knees all yesterday and last evening
in a confession which covered her
whole past down to her latest feat
an enormous shoplifting escapade
which involves the Brandels
Hayden Brothers, other Omaha
and several in Council Bluffs.

This last feat of Fainting
is a complete surprise to the
the stores involved and
Charles W. Savidge to whom
consigned on being released from
penitentiary.

"Well, she's up to her
eyes in it," said a police detective
the Rev. Mr. Savidge.

The Rev. Mr. Savidge
must have stolen yesterday,
time she came to the
penitentiary and the
charge. He declined the
portunity to see the event.

Fainting Bertha Up To Her Old Tricks Again

Stole Jewelry From Guests at
the Rome Hotel and
Is Arrested.

Released From the Asylum a
Week Ago and Promised
to Be Good.

Bertha—Fainting Bertha—Liebke is in
jail again, and the chances are exceed-
ingly good that she will remain in custo-
dy for some time.

An attaché
identified Faint-
ing Bertha who last Sat-
urday to claim a large
quantity of jewelry
from several stores.
Bertha, it was
stated, she had
stolen of which she
had a large amount
in her house.
Jersey City, N. J.,
later.

HAS DRIVEN THE DEVILS FROM FAINTING BERTHA

Pastor Savidge Will Exhibit Her
in Churches All Over
Country.

Sings and Recites Poems and
Bible Verses at Peoples'
Church.

The devils have been driven from
Bertha Liebke, known to the police all
over the nation as "Fainting Bertha."
says the Rev. Charles W. Savidge, who
has taken her in charge. He intends to
take her to churches all over the country,
where she can tell her story in the hope
of doing good.

"This is not a vaudeville stunt," the
Rev. Mr. Savidge declared. "We are go-
ing to visit churches that invite us and
we will depend on the collection to pay
our expenses, but it is for good and not
for stage purposes that we are going out."
During her stay in the asylum and prison,
when he was not having fits or raising
Ned, she was memorizing fits or raising
poetry and much of the bible. With Mr.
and Mrs. D. Allen Davis, who are caring
for her, and my son Mark, I will go with
her over the country, where she can use
her talent to sing and recite.

"At the two services at my church
yesterday, when she took part, the
was crowded. In the
cited a poem. The
and recited it
the event."

were often controlled with drugs such as morphine and opium. Hospitals also used strait-jackets and handcuffs and wrapped patients tightly in sheets to control them.

Bertha spent only a few weeks in the Missouri institution. In May 1911 she was arrested for a department store theft in Lincoln, Nebraska. In court she pleaded tearfully with the judge for mercy. She said she had been using cocaine at the time and was not responsible for her actions, the only reference to drug use ever associated with Bertha. The judge found Bertha guilty, however, and sentenced her to three years in the state penitentiary.

WHEN BERTHA entered the Nebraska Penitentiary in 1911 she was no longer the petite woman described at the start of her career. Before 1903 she had been described as 5 feet, 2½ inches and 120 pounds; now penitentiary records gave her weight at 155 pounds. Her prison photograph shows a tough woman of the world, and once again she found a tough world at the penitentiary in Lincoln. The close proximity of the few women prisoners to the male prisoners was a constant "source of trouble and danger." The women were idle much of the time since there was no occupational therapy for them. Old wooden bathing tubs spread infectious diseases. The kitchens and dining rooms were filthy, and rats, mice, and large cockroaches infested the prison. The warden considered the most demoralizing problem at the penitentiary to be the "dope and morphine habit."

Smashing panes of glass with her fists and terrorizing other inmates, Bertha was soon transferred from the Nebraska Penitentiary to the Ingleside Hospital for the Insane at Hastings. She remained there the next two years, despite two escapes. In some respects, Ingleside Hospital was a better institution than the state prison. Ingleside personnel encouraged more exercise and entertainment for patients and the physical plant was undergoing improvements. Yet Bertha claimed she was whipped and beaten by attendants. Overcrowding was a problem, and women were

kept in "poorly lighted and ill ventilated basements." Bertha gained a legal release from Ingleside in October 1913 (because of the overcrowded conditions) and returned to Omaha.

She quickly resumed her old ways. Bertha could not "be good if she really meant to," an Omaha police captain told a reporter after her arrest for intoxication and possible theft. "She is an habitual criminal. There apparently is no cure for her." Omaha authorities considered sending her to Iowa, but the officials there declared they did not want Bertha. Employees of the Nebraska mental hospitals threatened to quit if she returned.

THEN, FOR UNKNOWN REASONS, the Reverend Savidge decided to make another attempt to help her. Bertha told Savidge that many devils possessed her. Wisely, she signed a pledge stating that she would obey Savidge if released into his custody. Savidge and Bertha fasted and prayed together and immediately "she showed signs of a miracle having been performed." Bertha amazed many by reciting long quotations of Scripture and poetry, which she had probably learned in prison, where moral uplift was an accepted part of treatment. On the Sunday after Bertha's release Savidge took her to his church, The People's Church, to exhibit her miraculous improvement. He preached a sermon titled "Where Bertha Got Her Devils and from Whom and What Sort They Are." The next day he announced Bertha was free of all devils and that he intended to take her on a tour to show what had been accomplished.

The editor of the Blair, Nebraska, *Enterprise* suggested that Savidge was trying to profit personally by promoting Bertha, but the reverend denied that Bertha's appearances were "a vaudeville stunt." It seems likely, though, that Savidge recognized the opportunity of using Bertha to raise funds for his church and home for the elderly while showing his "miracle." Yet perhaps he seemed more

Opposite: Libbecke, in a 1911 penitentiary mug shot.



COURTESY THE AUTHOR

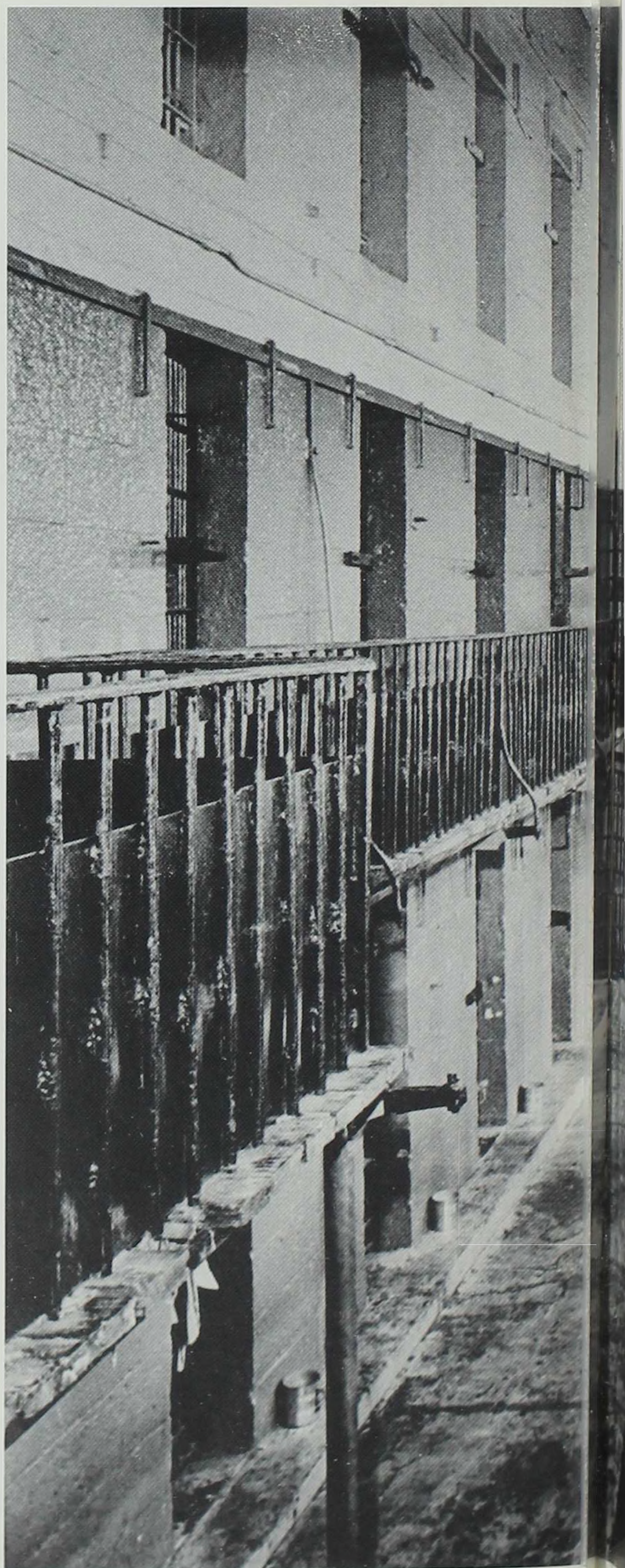
hopeful: "She works more now," he told reporters, "and is consequently much better to care for than in July 1904 when I took charge of her case and saved her for the time being."

Unfortunately, Bertha spent the next week engaged in a shoplifting spree at the major department stores in Omaha and Council Bluffs. Savidge blamed Bertha's problems on the presence of one last devil in her (apparently overlooked earlier), "a big, gray devil and he don't want to come out. But he'll have to," Savidge added. Savidge and Bertha returned all the stolen goods and he persuaded the merchants not to "jug her." Simultaneously Savidge announced that he was preparing a small booklet detailing Bertha's life of crime and her ongoing regeneration. Bertha needed additional prayer and redemption, according to Savidge, but she would begin preaching once the task was accomplished.

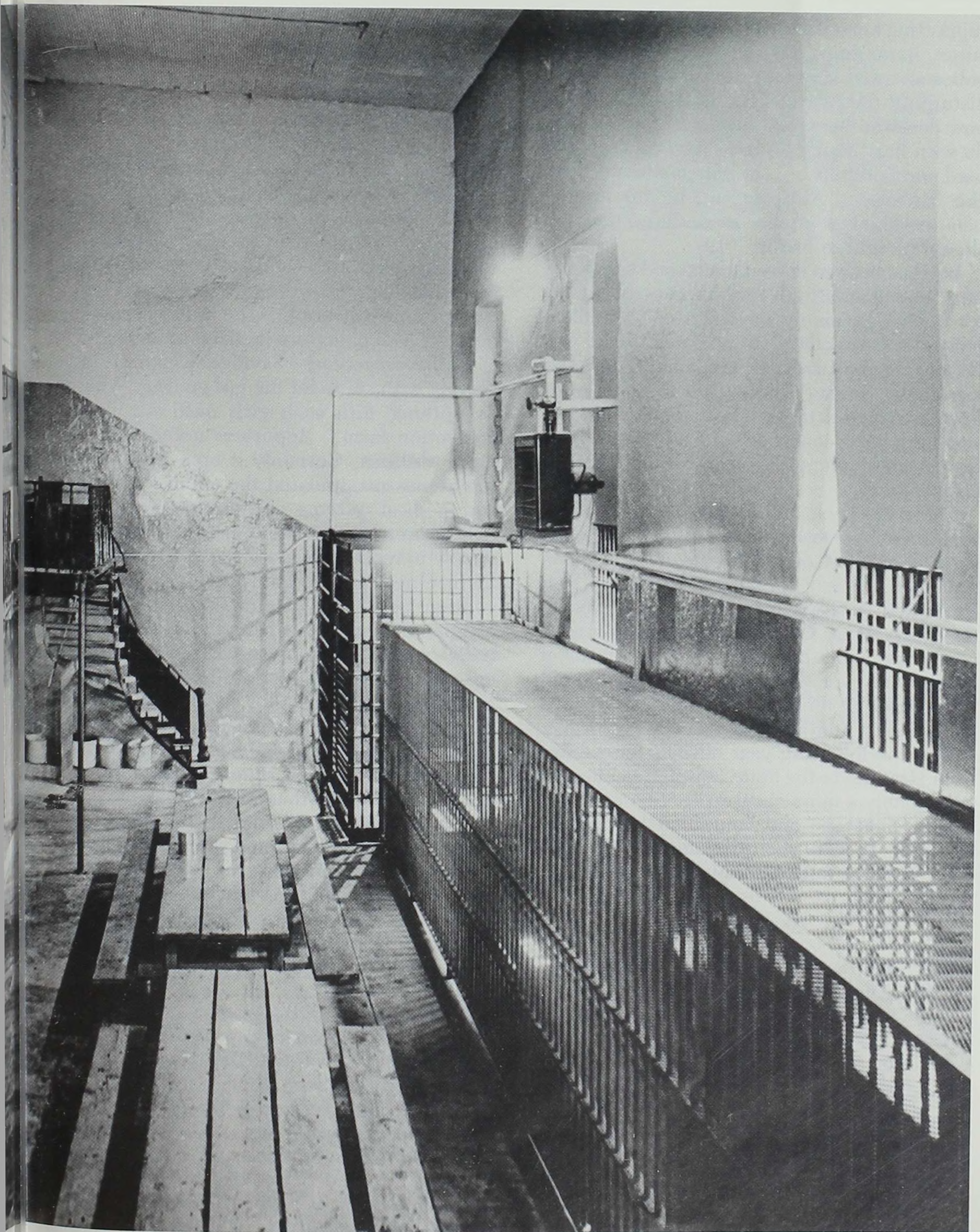
In December 1913 the story of Bertha's life appeared in print. The thirty-two page booklet had a scarlet cover and the appropriate title "Clothed in Scarlet." Bertha now traveled to nearby towns and cities over the next several months to speak at churches and sell her story. She was to receive half the proceeds, and Savidge the rest. This arrangement prompted a local citizen to comment in a letter to the *Omaha World-Herald* that Savidge was hardly following religious principles by using Bertha for financial gain. The headline announcing a January 1914 appearance suggests a similar skepticism: "STANDING ROOM ONLY FOR FAINTING BERTHA: Pastor Savidge Tells Blair [Nebraska] People to Shell Out or Lord Might Kill Them."

Nevertheless Bertha continued to sell her book. One of her stops in the spring of 1914 was Hastings, Nebraska, where she had been hospitalized. While there she sold seventy-eight copies at twenty-five cents to a dollar each. She told officials, "I have been good for five months now and have been making money all the time." Bertha appeared to be leading a more normal life.

By early May 1914 she was reported selling neckties and newspapers as well — apparently



Right: A setting all too familiar to Bertha. Half of her life was spent in prisons and mental institutions.



supporting herself honestly. Then she began to falter, haranguing people near her. Omaha police arrested her for disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. The Reverend Savidge now declared he would have nothing more to do with her though he had "never labored so hard and faithfully . . . to snatch a brand from the burning." Announcing he no longer believed she was insane, he declared that she should be sent to prison.

Bertha chose to leave Omaha and spent the next several months in various midwestern cities (including ninety days in the Milwaukee House of Correction). By early 1915 she was back in Omaha, arrested, and jailed. There she reportedly set her clothing on fire and swallowed strychnine tablets she had in her possession for a heart condition. She also sent a note to one of her sisters: "Ask my precious mama to forgive me."

The real shock for Bertha was the court's sentence of one to seven years at the penitentiary. At the prison only four days, Bertha screamed all night, broke window panes, and attempted to strangle herself. Transferred to the hospital at Hastings, she stayed there nearly two and a half years. Within a week of parole, however, she was arrested again and transferred, at the warden's request, to Hastings. Bertha continued her efforts to escape, and in the following year officials moved her from Hastings to the State Hospital at Lincoln, presumably a more secure site. She managed one brief escape and continued her violent behavior. In 1919 she threw formaldehyde in the eyes of a nurse, seriously damaging the nurse's sight.

THIS INCIDENT, apparently the only one where she injured anyone, may have persuaded hospital officials never to release Bertha. She would now spend the last twenty years of her life at the State Hospital at Lincoln, where she had little chance of being helped.

Long the subject of good newspaper copy, she faded out of the glare of press coverage. Bertha's episodes over the years had provided appealing elements: a colorful character, bizarre behavior, religious repentance. But

although these stories provide a record of Bertha's thefts and arrests, they don't tell us everything. For instance, though she was frequently arrested, we don't know how often she wasn't caught, and hence how successful she was in supporting herself through crime. We likewise don't know whether she deliberately chose the risks and consequences of a life of petty crime as one of the few alternatives open to her, or if she was truly mentally deficient — or "feble-minded" — and unable to distinguish between right and wrong.

Opinions differed. One newspaper reported, "The police are inclined to believe she is a trifle demented." Savidge declared, "It is playing with sin to let the girl go free. We can do nothing with such girls until we have a correction farm." Reporters noted her dramatic abilities. Certainly it appears that she sometimes manipulated the ambivalent court and medical systems, and that she sometimes fell victim to them. These institutions seemed unable to reach consensus regarding her mental faculties, and certainly seemed unable to contain her — given her apparent ease of escape. Her story is a compelling and admittedly confusing example of an individual up against an ambivalent and inadequate system of custody and care. The labels and charges applied to her (feble-mindedness, prostitute, pickpocket, drunkenness) had developed over the years into a saga of crime, confinement, and release — until Bertha threw formaldehyde in the nurse's eyes at the Lincoln hospital.

By the 1930s the hospital where Bertha continued to be confined was severely overcrowded. Treatment was inadequate and out of date. According to one visitor, the patients sat "grimly around the walls of the room in chairs without the appearance of any hope whatsoever."

The misery of Bertha's twenty-year confinement was not of primary importance to society. More important was that Bertha was a female who had long ago been labeled "feble-minded" and had become a criminal. She was the type of individual who early twentieth-century society had finally concluded could and probably should be locked up for life. She gained her freedom only in 1939 when she died of cancer at the Lincoln facility. □